Peter Brook Online Teaching Resource

Part Two: An overview of Peter Brook's life and work

Peter Brook was born in 1925, local to Gunnersbury Park Museum, in Chiswick. His family home and the first few years of his life were spent in Turnham Green. He directed his first production at age 18, and continues to direct today - his latest production played in London in 2016. Not only has Brook directed and toured productions throughout the world for more than 60 years, but he is equally influential as a theorist. He has written extensively about theatre, and whilst his core principles imbue all his work he has consistently experimented and innovated.

By tracking a history of Brook's productions we can observe his shifting interests and continued desire to answer the question he posed in his seminal book in 1968 *The Empty Space*, 'Why theatre at all?' It was both a practical and a philosophical question. In simple terms, how could theatre 'be better'? But underneath this is the deeper question as to why we humans make theatre. He sought the answer in other cultures, travelling and working with performers from around the world. He has also turned frequently to other disciplines- to neuroscience and anthropology. With such a span of time, place and intellectual fields it is difficult to pin down one overriding method. This has never been his intention, as he states, '*we are not trying to create a method, we want to make discoveries'.* However, by detailing some of the influences on his life, by referencing his writing and through studying the many resources in his archive we will draw out his essential philosophy and then present a selection of exercises and techniques to use with students.

After working as an assistant director at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1940s Brook directed at the RSC before working at the Royal Opera House for some years. This was integral to his growth as a director, developing a sophisticated stage craft, and conceiving and producing large scale, often classical, productions. However, by the 1960s we see a director who has a different thirst- one for experimentation, rejecting the established forms of theatre and seeking to address how theatre can exist during times of political upheaval and technological changes. What is the place of theatre in the contemporary world? In this respect Peter Brook has been part of a 20th century tradition of experimental theatre directors who have rejected and attacked the parameters they had inherited. During this period Brook was in philosophical and practical dialogue with practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht and of profound influence on him, Antonin Artaud. They interrogated and subverted many of the theatre 'rules' they had inherited, and sought to establish their own. The relationship between the actors with one another, with the audience and the space all became negotiable.

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The experimentation in theatre in the 20th century was exciting, innovative and paradigm shifting. This is what Peter Brook bought to the RSC in the 1960s with his Theatre of Cruelty season, which put into practice the ideas of Artaud.

Essential to Theatre of Cruelty is the connection between the performers and the audience. The challenge was to provoke and elicit the maximum emotional and visceral response from the audience. Realism was failing to achieve this connection between actors and between actors and the audience so Brook explored other forms. His focus turned to the actor within an ensemble, nurturing an intuitive connection between actors. He explored this connection by moving away from psychological approaches to acting, instead tapping into other 'energies'. The actor's body and a deep physical awareness could release impulses that 'thinking' and psychological approaches tended to impede. Brook developed a range of exercises and improvisations that placed the actor as the most creative entity in the process of making a piece of theatre. By presenting a range of works and works-in-progress Brook made the process of creating theatre integral to its production.

In 1968 he published *The Empty Space*, both a scathing attack on contemporary theatre and a treatise for what the theatre should strive to do. It was both a rejection and a manifesto, written from a director who was already a pillar in the British theatre world, and yet was attacking it from within. He cited theatre history, utilising Shakespeare and Greek theatre, as well as theatre practice from around the world. Using this richness and depth he sought to understand a simple premise "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." This basic opening conceals a much deeper question that Brook grappled with in his book, and throughout his career- what happens between the actor and the audience in an act of theatre? How is it possible for us to *experience* something when watching theatre, beyond what we observe on the stage? And how do actors make visible what is invisible in everyday life?

This search led Brook to Paris, where he established the International Centre for Theatre Research at the Theatre Bouffes du Nord. In this home, with an ensemble of actors from around the world he continued to experiment in his search to understand how the actor can commune with an audience most instinctively and effectively. The company did not merely experiment and research behind closed doors, but continued to produce performances, taking a range of stimuli as their starting pints- including Shakespeare, anthropological studies, a Hindu epic poem and a 12th century Sufi poem. The texts explored were often fables or mythical narratives, "reuniting the community, in all its diversity, within the same shared experience." Each offered a spring board for Brook and his actors to pursue the connection between performer and audience.

Theatre Bouffes du Nord still produces productions directed by Brook, and his international company continue to tour productions throughout the world. The aesthetic of a Peter Brook production has become marked as one of minimalism, a stripped back stage world,

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permitting the actors to live, breathe and share with one another and the audience. This minimalism was never an aim but the result of his process.

Spanning many years and traversing numerous countries Brooks' core tenets can be summarized:

- The actor is the primary creative source.
- The actor's inner impulses must be freed and externalised, making visible for an audience this inner territory.
- The ensemble, in which the team of actors share and respond to one another's impulses, is integral to theatre.
- Improvisation is a pivotal part of rehearsal, and should also be maintained when running a performance in front of an audience.
- The rehearsal process is one where the performance develops, evolves and is discovered; the final production is not a prior 'known end' but the result of exploration.
- The rehearsal room has a spirit of experimentation and discovery within a structure of discipline and repetition.

Recommendation for further reading

Peter Brook's writing:

The Empty Space (1968)

The Shifting Point (1988)

There Are No Secrets (1993)

Threads of Time (1998)

Other writing on Peter Brook:

Mitter, Shomit; *Systems of Rehearsal (1992)*

Heilpern, John; *Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa (1977)*

Kustow, Michael; *Peter Brook: A Biography (2005)*

You and/or your students can visit the V & A site where the Peter Brook Archives are housed. The address is: V&A Archive, Blythe House, 23 Blythe Road, London, W14 0QX.

Viewings are by appointment and you can specify what you would like to see. Contact details and their full catalogue can be found here: http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/a/archives/

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